

CHAPTER SEVEN

‘Staging the counter-narrative in Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man*’¹

RONAN McKINNEY

Chapter Summary: The 9/11 attacks provoked an intensified sense of individual and collective vulnerability in the US, and a corresponding effort to reassert the integrity of the body politic – to clearly demarcate self and other, friend and foe. In his 2001 essay ‘In the Ruins of the Future’, DeLillo proposed a ‘counter-narrative’ that would disrupt the fantasized clarity of such boundaries. This chapter presents DeLillo’s 2007 novel *Falling Man* as a more developed articulation of that ‘counter-narrative’. Using the work of Leo Bersani and Judith Butler, I show how, in Lianne Neudecker’s interactions with the paintings of Giorgio Morandi and with the performance artist ‘Falling Man’, art mediates trauma by constructively repeating it. This allows Lianne to reconceive vulnerability not as a threatened violation of her psychic or bodily integrity, but as its fundamental condition. As such, *Falling Man* offers a re-description of subjectivity that undermines the fictions of sovereignty and security that sustain neoliberal and neoconservative ideologies.

Falling Man begins with a classic DeLillo set piece, situating the reader with virtuoso skill amidst a moment of world-historical significance. Keith Neudecker wanders dazed from the World Trade Center as it collapses behind him; he is covered in ash and carries a briefcase which is not his own. For reasons unclear to himself, he arrives at the apartment of his estranged wife Lianne. The novel follows them through the days and years after ‘the planes’ as they rekindle the embers of their marriage then gradually drift apart again, neither able to fully articulate their trauma. The book’s title refers both to Richard Drew’s famous photograph of a man falling to his death from the towers, and to a fictional performance artist who jumps from various locations around New York and then dangles in mid-air, held aloft by a harness, mimicking the posture of the man in Drew’s photograph. In this chapter I shall argue that, in Lianne’s encounters with *Falling Man* and with the paintings of Giorgio Morandi, DeLillo explores the fragility which is a fundamental condition of selfhood. The sudden awareness of vulnerability, at both an individual and collective psychic level, was one deeply traumatic effect of 9/11. It induced as a reaction an attempt to reassert the integrity of the body politic, to clearly demarcate self and other, friend and foe – as witnessed, for example, in President George W Bush’s address to Congress nine days after the events, when he warned ‘Every nation, in every region’ that they had to make a decision: ‘either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists’ (Bush 2001; see also: Faludi 2008). Lianne’s encounters with art in *Falling Man* disrupt the fantasized clarity of this boundary, showing how her subjectivity is shaped by what exceeds it – by other subjects and by her own past. These encounters thus offer an example of what DeLillo has called ‘the counter-narrative’, opposing official (and deeply ideological) narratives of 9/11 which sought to reinforce the autonomy of the subject. Instead, the counter-narrative offers an account of subjectivity as deeply embedded in what exceeds it, and therefore

subject to a primary vulnerability which cannot be eradicated and which demands an ethics of care for the other.

For John N. Duvall, ‘part of the problem facing DeLillo in addressing 9/11 is that the terrorist has usurped the role of politicizing the image’ (Duvall 2011: 155). 9/11 showed how thoroughly terrorists have outstripped the writer’s capacity to ‘make raids on human consciousness’, as one of DeLillo’s fictional alter egos, the writer Bill Gray, puts it (DeLillo 1992: 41). Duvall places the novel in the context of DeLillo’s career-long examination of the political function of the artist, and the significant role of performance art in his later work. However, where Duvall addresses the role of Falling Man as artist, the novel continues a shift of focus in DeLillo’s work, begun in *The Body Artist*, from the politics of artistic production to the phenomenology of spectatorship. This essay follows Linda Kauffman in focusing on Lauren as beholder, and in framing the novel as an exploration of the ethics of spectatorship (Kauffman: 2008). In exploring the novel’s account of aesthetic experience I will focus on a few key moments wherein Lianne’s awareness of the permeable boundaries of her subjectivity is dramatized in her reactions to the paintings of Morandi and to Falling Man’s performance art. My analysis of these scenes will be framed by a psychoanalytic account of the aesthetic as a replication of the initial constitution of the subject. In this reading, art can mediate trauma by constructively repeating it, and allow Lianne to conceive vulnerability not as a threatened violation of her psychic or bodily integrity, but as its fundamental condition. First, though, we will need to examine the context of DeLillo’s response to 9/11 and the politics of the ‘War on Terror’.

‘Our world, parts of our world, have crumbled into theirs’

Such is his association in public consciousness with themes of terror and spectacle that it seemed DeLillo *had* to respond to 9/11 in some fashion. His initial response, an essay entitled ‘In the Ruins of the Future’, appeared in December 2001 (2001a). In its conjunction of multiple

modes, narratives, and voices, the essay disrupts the then-developing 'official' narrative of 9/11 as an act of war perpetrated by madmen, part of a global 'clash of civilizations', and/or the final act of the Cold War. It also 'deconstructs the very dichotomies others reinforce' (Kauffman 2008: 356), particularly the insistent effort to separate 'us' and 'them'. DeLillo suggests that the attacks were motivated by resentment of the relentless worldwide extension of 'American' values: It is the high gloss of our modernity. It is the thrust of our technology. It is our perceived godlessness. It is the blunt force of our foreign policy. It is the power of American culture to penetrate every wall, home, life, and mind (2001a: 33). However, the attacks momentarily reversed this cultural imperialism, breaching the divide between a rich but paranoid West and its others: 'Our world, parts of our world, have crumbled into theirs' (2001a: 33).² 9/11 thus changed America's view of itself and its position in the world, awakening a perhaps unprecedented sense of vulnerability and posing the question of the United States', and by extension the West's, capacity to accommodate cultural difference. DeLillo invokes 'the daily sweeping taken-for-granted greatness of New York', the city which 'will accommodate every language, ritual, belief, and opinion' (2001a: 40), represented in the figure of a young Muslim woman praying on a rug amidst the cosmopolitan chaos of Canal Street.³ It is an image of difference accommodated, the opposition of West and non-West undermined in a moment utopian in its very banality: yet it is also a lost utopia, a memory from a month before 'the planes'. 'Ruins' poses the question of how to respond to difference, and of the extent to which identity is conditioned by rejection or recognition of otherness. 'Today', writes DeLillo, 'the world narrative belongs to terrorists': however, 'The narrative ends in the rubble, and it is left to us to create the counter-narrative' (2001a: 33, 34). In a context where distinctions between 'Us' and 'Them' had become deeply politicized, and in which the power of images had been made horrifically apparent, DeLillo proposes a more complex relationship of self and other as the

beginning of that counter-narrative. The image of the praying Muslim woman becomes a symbol of the West's capacity to tolerate difference as part of its identity, and of literature's power to provide a language for that capacity. In *Falling Man* DeLillo would explore that capacity in greater depth.

'It was what there was between them'

In *Falling Man*, the stakes of identity are visual: its numbed survivors are haunted by what they have seen. This is apparent in the fragmented scene revolving around an argument between Lianne's mother Nina and her lover Martin about the cause and meaning of the attacks. Nina is a retired professor of art history, Martin a German art dealer who seems to have been involved with Leftist terrorist groups in the seventies. Their dispute restages the themes DeLillo had rehearsed in 'Ruins of the Future' – politics, religion, ontology, history – and marks the beginning of the end of their relationship. Afterward, whilst Nina dozes, Lianne chats with Martin about 'the things everyone was talking about': the attacks, who and how and why (DeLillo 2008: 42).⁴ Nina wakes, and meets Lianne's gaze:

She opened her eyes, finally, and the two women looked at each other. It was a sustained moment and Lianne did not know, could not have put into words what it was they were sharing. Or she knew but could not name the overlapping emotions. It was what there was between them, meaning every minute together and apart, what they'd known and felt and what would come next, in the minutes, days and years. (48)

Meanwhile, Martin turns to scrutinize two still life paintings by Giorgio Morandi which hang on the wall of Nina's apartment. He claims to see the towers of the World Trade Center in two tall, dark shapes amidst the group of objects in one painting. Lianne looks: she too sees the

towers. No longer timeless, aloof from politics and history, the painting is remade as Lianne stands before it, suddenly seeming to reflect an event that occurred half a century after its production. In Duvall's analysis, 'For Martin to comment on this painting in terms of 9/11 terrorism is to grant the terrorist a role similar to that of the artist' in remaking perception (Duvall 2011: 158). It also reveals the extent to which Lianne's subjectivity both determines and is determined by the world around her; the boundary of self and world is figured as a site of transaction rather than exclusion. Turning back to the room, Lianne briefly sees the scene as a still life before 'the human figures appear, Mother and Lover' (111). Some aspect of Lianne's identity – her relations with others and with otherness – is being staged, and perhaps shifting, in these twinned encounters with painting and parent. In the first, Lianne and Martin share a moment of recognition. In the second, Lianne recognizes how much of herself is shared with, or bound up in, Nina.

Lianne's dialogue with the Morandis permeates *Falling Man*, framing the novel as a discourse on looking and interiority, on the interpenetration of perception and memory, subject and object. It is also a meditation on the primacy of loss and the corporeal and psychic fragility of the subject. Lianne has lost her father, has almost lost her husband and will lose her mother over the course of the novel. The paintings both stage and mitigate that loss, summon its pain and enable Lianne to mourn. Through looking at the paintings Lianne is led to renewed awareness of her own vulnerability, and the losses both real and imagined which structure her identity. For Judith Butler, in the experience of loss, 'something about who we are is revealed, something that delineates the ties we have to others, that shows us that these ties constitute what we are, ties or bonds that compose us' (Butler 2006: 22). For Butler, following Levinas, the ethical relation begins in acceptance of one's dependence upon the other, which includes the possibility that one may be the object of the other's violence. Butler suggests mourning can renew awareness of our primary dependency upon the other:

Many people think that grief is privatizing, that it returns us to a solitary situation and is, in that sense, depoliticizing. But I think it furnishes a sense of political community of a complex order, and it does this first of all by bringing to the fore the relational ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility. (2006: 22)

Where Freud conceives mourning as a process of withdrawing one's psychic dependency upon an other (or an imagined ideal other, such as an idea), Butler argues that in the experience of loss we are brought to the realization that the self is always permeable, incomplete and in dialogue with an outside. Vulnerability is the irreducible price of agency. Significantly, Butler extends her thesis to the level of culture to describe the United States' collective reaction to 9/11. According to Butler, as a result of the attacks the USA suffered the cultural loss of 'the prerogative, only and always, to be the one who transgresses the sovereign boundaries of other states, but never to be in the position of having one's own boundaries transgressed' (2006: 39). This echoes the argument made in sections of the Left that 9/11 represented a 'fall into history', marking the end of America's apparent immunity to the violence associated with processes of globalization of which it is one of the principal agents (Žižek: 2002; Baudrillard: 2003).

For Butler, 'grief contains the possibility of apprehending a mode of dispossession that is fundamental to who I am' (2006: 28). In *Falling Man*, the image seems to offer a means of staging that dispossession rather than attempting to overcome or disavow it. Even in Lianne's solitary confrontation with the artwork, the temporal and social nature of her being is revealed. In *Falling Man*, the image stages the subject as always coming undone, predicated upon what exceeds it. Yet the realization of this dispossession leads not to crisis, as in trauma, but to a renewed appreciation of the mutual dependence of self and other: 'It was what there was between them' (48). In her encounters with Morandi's paintings Lianne is able to project the crisis outward onto the artwork, and so encounters the limits of her self-possession. In *Falling*

Man, self-shattering – the ‘mode of dispossession’ which Butler argues is induced by loss – produces humility in Lianne’s awareness of her dependence on a world that exceeds her and to which she is irremediably exposed. This response contrasts starkly with the bellicose public discourse around sovereignty in the post-9/11 US, and offers a possible counter-narrative to it.

If loss reveals a primary vulnerability, ‘a mode of dispossession that is fundamental to who I am’, how can art mediate that dispossession as something other than trauma? To answer this question, and understand the significance of self-shattering in the formation of the subject, we must draw upon Freud’s psychoanalytic account of the subject’s initial separation of itself from the world and its relationship to that world. This will show how art can mediate the traumatising awareness of vulnerability by repeating it as aesthetic pleasure.

‘I am not sure where one ends and the other begins’

In *The Freudian Body* Leo Bersani traces the textual movement which escapes Freud’s attempt, in the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, to fix sexuality in teleological stages and defined areas of the body. Bersani instead locates its genesis in a masochistic response to trauma, to the infant’s overwhelming and shattering experience of the mother’s love. The infant initially lacks ‘ego structures capable of resisting or [...] binding the stimuli to which it is exposed’ (Bersani 1990: 38). Masochism, as the process whereby the unpleasure aroused by excessive stimulation is converted into sexual pleasure, not only allows the infant to survive this crisis: it provides the basic co-ordinates of adult sexuality. We desire what we lack, yet this privation is experienced as a kind of pleasure known as *jouissance*. Intriguingly, Bersani suggests that adult erotic *and* aesthetic experiences attempt to recapture and repeat that libid-inized primary self-shattering:

If the sexual is, at the most primitive level, the attempted replication of a shattering (or psychically traumatizing) pleasure, art [...] is the attempted replication *of* that

replication. That is, it repeats the replicative movement of sexuality as a domesticating and civilizing project of self-recognition. (1990: 111)

Both sexual and aesthetic experiences are rooted in the mediation of a self-shattering trauma as masochistic pleasure. For Freud trauma results from a failure of mediation, in which the psyche's defences are overwhelmed by a violent stimulus from the external world. In Bersani's account masochism offers a structure capable of mediating that traumatising force, whether it be aggressive or erotic, by making the two equivalent. Furthermore, the aesthetic is a formalized repetition of the primary masochism of sexuality, the repetition of a repetition, which 'repeats the replicative movement of sexuality as a domesticating and civilizing project of self-recognition' (1990: 111). Bersani thus links repetition and self-recognition through the aesthetic.

In Bersani's terms, self-recognition arises from self-shattering; the repetitions of a primary self-shattering in sexuality and then art induce a movement from trauma to agency and finally to reflective self-recognition. DeLillo makes the same connection in *Falling Man*. Siri Hustvedt has described the experience of prolonged looking at Morandi's clusters of objects: 'Shapes begin to bleed into one another or appear to push against the objects next to them, invading their space ... I am not sure where one ends and the other begins' (Hustvedt 2009: 26). This blurring of boundaries seems to occur not only within the image, but between image and world (the towers 'appear') and between image and beholder. On seeing the towers or her mother 'in' the painting (49, 111, 210), Lianne is faced with the question of where that spectral image is located: in her mind, in the painting, or somewhere in between. The image stages the shifting connections and dislocations which define and disrupt Lianne's identity: 'It was what there was between them' (48). Nonetheless, in figuring the interpenetration of self and world the paintings allow for a reconstitution of Lianne's subjectivity around that experience of dislocation. Fractured and complex it may be, but the encounter with the paintings is Lianne's. Her very

absorption in the image provokes a certain theatricality in which she recognizes herself as vulnerable, contingent and embedded in the world. This arises through the overlaying in the painting of echoes of ‘the planes’ and of Lianne’s relationship with her mother, whose mortality is becoming ever more apparent. In this way, Lianne’s response to the paintings supports what Bersani calls ‘a domesticating and civilizing project of self-recognition’, even whilst it dramatizes the contingency of that self. Not for nothing do we speak of being ‘lost in contemplation’ of a painting or ‘absorbed’ in a book. And yet this loss of self is also a form of self-consciousness, a way of recognizing the self in its interaction with, even its ravishment by, an external non-self. Through the disruption of her psychic interiority provoked by her experience of art, Lianne comes to recognize herself as irreducibly vulnerable, always threatened by self-shattering in her primary exposure to the other. This exposure is dramatized most powerfully in the novel in Lianne’s central encounter with the performance artist known as Falling Man.

‘This was hers to record and to absorb’

Performance art occupies a prominent place in DeLillo’s later work, often providing a way to explore the psychic and corporeal experience of time and loss (for example in *The Body Artist*).⁵ This is evident in *Falling Man*, described by Linda Kauffman as ‘a novel obsessed with the corporeal body’ (Kauffman 2011: 135). This obsession is most visibly enacted in the performances of Falling Man himself, which stage trauma as a profound disruption of corporeal as well as psychic autonomy. He appears in each of the novel’s three sections: once near the beginning as Lianne picks up Nina from Grand Central Station; at the end of the central section as she leaves her weekly storyline session with Alzheimer’s patients in Harlem; and again in the final section when she comes upon his obituary in a newspaper. Lianne’s second encounter with Falling Man forms the novel’s fulcrum. Heading homeward, Lianne becomes aware of a suspension of activity on the street, people’s attention drawn to something directly above her.

A man, 'white male in suit and tie' (159), is climbing onto a maintenance platform alongside the elevated train line: 'This is who he had to be' (160). As a train passes, he jumps and is held twenty feet up with 'blood rushing to his head, away from hers' (168). The dangling man seems to invade Lianne's bodily and psychic space, yet remains other, beyond understanding:

There was something awful about the stylized pose, body and limbs, his signature stroke. But the worst of it was the stillness itself and her nearness to the man, her position here, with no one closer to him than she was. She could have spoken to him but that was another plane of being, beyond reach. (168)

Falling Man's performances clearly recall both the people who jumped from the blazing towers on 9/11, and Richard Drew's photograph of one such man in mid-fall. As 'Falling Man' the performer doubles for the figure in the photograph and for the thousands of unburied dead whose pulverized bodies literally hang in the air of New York in the weeks after 'the planes'. Like Drew's photograph, the performances are both singular and part of a series (Drew shot twelve frames of the 'falling man', only publishing one). Each performance both recalls and reframes the others, along with the photograph they cite and the desperate act it records. Yet they are not photographic, but produce instead a *tableau vivant* that restores what the photograph elides: the corporeal presence of a body in space and in lived time. For Peter Boxall 'the body of the artist, suspended in mid fall, and occupied overwhelmingly by the absent body of an unnamed other, suggests that the narrative time in which recovery might take place has been suspended, arrested' (Boxall 2011: 175). This is true insofar as Falling Man enacts the recurrence of the traumatic past, disrupting the onward thrust of narrative. Yet one should not underestimate the *presence* of Falling Man as performer, nor the durational 'body time' his dangling figure performs. As much as the performance 'brings the event back, as if in a kind of *déjà vu*' (Boxall 2011: 175), it does so in a powerfully realized present shared by performer and audience as they, no less than he, hang suspended *in time*. His fall provokes an intense

awareness of her own body and its physical relationship to the body dangling in space above her head: 'She was the photograph, the photosensitive surface. That nameless body coming down, this was hers to record and to absorb' (223). The moment becomes for Lianne something like what Lauren Hartke, bereaved protagonist of *The Body Artist*, calls a 'living still life': it seems to 'stop time, stretch it out, or open it up' (DeLillo 2001b: 107). Lauren is describing her performance piece 'Body Time', the title of which applies equally to the effect of Falling Man's performance upon Lianne. This is part of the counter-narrative inasmuch as the performance reintroduces the temporal, and by implication narrative, into the static image. It is a notable instance of the interest in duration and slowness evident in late DeLillo (Lauren Hartke's performance in *The Body Artist*, Richard Elster's obsession with geologic time in *Point Omega*), and a counterpoint to the hyper-acceleration DeLillo has identified elsewhere (as for example in *Cosmopolis*) as a defining feature of modernity. Finally, the performance insists upon the corporeal vulnerability of the falling body, an element repressed in narratives of 9/11 dominated by the image, and in the suppression of the narratives of those who fell or jumped from the towers (Junod: 2002).

Psychic trauma often manifests itself as temporal disruption whereby a memory of the traumatic event recurs beyond the subject's control. According to Cathy Caruth, the pathology of the traumatic event consists 'solely in the *structure of its experience* or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it' (Caruth 1995: 4, emphasis in original). Trauma represents the eternal return of the same: in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* Freud links it with the death drive's tendency toward an inert, non-differentiated state (Freud 2001). Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan summarizes Freud's argument for the existence of two qualitatively different kinds of repetition: 'Constructive repetition emphasizes difference, destructive repetition emphasizes same-

ness (i.e., to repeat successfully is not to repeat)' (Rimmon-Kenan 1980: 153). To be constructive and serve the pleasure principle, repetition must somehow transmute the event repeated, giving the subject some degree of control over the process of iteration and thus relaying the trauma of loss into the pleasure of reproduction. Freud gives the example of the '*fort-da* game' played by his grandson, wherein the infant repeatedly threw a cotton reel over the side of his pram, each time pulling it back in with a delighted noise that Freud interpreted as "*Fort ... Da!*", German for "Gone ... There!" (Freud 2001: 15). In Freud's reading of the episode, the boy achieves a degree of mastery over the absence of his mother by replaying it in a scenario of which he is in control. It is the *difference* of his game with the cotton reel from the experience of his mother's absence, together with the infant's control over the pattern of repetition, which allows it to become pleasurable. The infant recognizes himself through his repetitive throwing and recovery of the reel. To put it in Bersani's terms, the aesthetic (the infant's game) mediates trauma by restaging it, but *differently*, and this difference (the distance between art and life) is what recodes the traumatic incident as recuperative. This contrasts with the traumatic repetition that possesses the subject and returns him to the traumatic moment, inscribing him in a scenario over which he has no control.

Repeatedly throwing himself off buildings and then dangling in space suspended by a rope, Falling Man repeats the child's gesture of throwing the cotton reel over the edge of his cot. Where the child repeats the disappearance of his mother, Falling Man repeats the horrific sight of bodies falling from the towers, and its repetition in Drew's photograph. Freud points out that in the *fort-da* game the child is in fact staging a double absence: that of the mother and of the repression which 'absents' the episode from the child's consciousness (Rimmon-Kenan 1980: 155). The game thus brings to presence an absence. Similarly, Falling Man repeats the absence of the dead, whose bodies were largely invisible except in the images of those who jumped from the towers, and the repression or repetition of this absence in the censorship of those

images.⁶ Of course, whereas the child gains pleasure by causing the reel's reappearance, Lianne is not in control of Falling Man's performances. However, they do provide an image for the trauma, or more accurately the traumas, which Lauren is trying to assimilate. The performances dramatize what we might call Lianne's subjection to history – the fact that as an embodied subject she is embedded within, and subject to, a world which she cannot control and is frighteningly vulnerable to its violence. In staging this vulnerability, the performed falls open up the possibility of coming to terms with it, rather in the way the psychoanalytic process exorcises the symptom by integrating it within a narrative.

The event she refers to as 'the planes' is not the only trauma staged for Lianne in Falling Man's performance. Before jumping, the man turns toward the train, looking 'into his death by fire' (167). The phrase evokes the memory of Lianne's father, who nineteen years earlier 'gazed into the muzzle blast' (130) of his shotgun on discovering he was suffering from Alzheimer's disease. As she runs blindly downtown after fleeing the performance, Lianne is seized by the thought that he 'Died by his own hand' (169). In seeking 'a crack in the world' (168) in which to fit her encounter with Falling Man, Lianne is also striving to assimilate the death of her father. The performance repeats in displaced form her inability to predict or prevent her father's death, or to absorb his loss in the years since; her father's ghost has been hanging above her 'with no one closer to him than she was', yet still 'beyond reach' (168). In struggling to 'absorb what she saw, take it home, wrap it around her, sleep in it' (210) as she later does with a drawing by Morandi, Lianne is equally struggling to finally accept the loss of her father. Her encounter with Falling Man becomes for Lianne a 'living still life' in a very different way from the Morandi, yet one which is ultimately connected through its disruption of the boundaries between inside and outside, past and present, body and image, loss and mourning.

‘Turn it into living tissue, who you are’

The novel’s final section is set three years after ‘the planes’. Nina is dead, Martin once again somewhere in Europe; the Morandis have been returned to him at Nina’s insistence. With mixed feelings Lianne visits an exhibition of Morandi’s work. As she looks around the gallery one painting holds her attention:

It was a variation on one of the paintings her mother had owned. She noted the nature and shape of each object, the placement of objects, the tall dark oblongs, the white bottle. She could not stop looking. There was something hidden in the painting. Nina’s living room was there, memory and motion. The objects in the painting faded into the figures behind them, the woman smoking in the chair, the standing man. (210)

Nina haunts the painting as did the towers three years previously. As before, looking takes Lianne ‘inward, down and in’ (111) yet also outside of herself, melding perception and memory, world and psyche, art and life. This becomes clear in her response to the drawings hanging in the gallery’s office:

She examined the drawings. She wasn’t sure why she was looking so intently. She was passing beyond pleasure into some kind of assimilation. She was trying to absorb what she saw, take it home, wrap it around her, sleep in it. There was so much to see. Turn it into living tissue, who you are. (210)

Compare the description above with Siri Hustvedt’s account of looking at Morandi’s work:

If I [...] give myself over to what I am seeing, there will be an accompanying feeling of strangeness and utter muteness, even transcendence [...] Indeed, if you look long enough at a single object, you yourself, your “I-ness” will vanish into the fullness of the image you are looking at (Hustvedt 2009: 28).

These encounters enact a displacement of the psychic boundaries of selfhood, such that both Hustvedt and Lianne are left wondering where they end and the world begins. In Lianne's effort to assimilate the Morandi into her very being she is learning to absorb the impact of her parents' deaths. The staging of loss in her response to the painting is not traumatic for Lianne but allows her to recognize the loss as part of who she is. In this moment, as in *Falling Man* as a whole, art fosters self-recognition through the staging of a prior self-shattering. It allows Lianne to recognize the ineradicable vulnerability arising from her constitutive openness to the world of which she is a part: her identity is paradoxically affirmed in the experience of its contingency.

Lianne's acceptance of her vulnerability is fragile and contingent, however. The novel leaves her 'ready to be alone, in reliable calm, she and the kid, the way they were before the planes appeared that day' (236). This suggests a lingering desire to return to a time untainted by trauma, and to isolate the mother-son dyad from the wider world. One can detect the same nostalgic desire for security present in her effort to 'absorb what she saw, take it home, wrap it around her, sleep in it' (210). In an essay on the post-9/11 novel, Richard Gray laments 'the groping after a language to say the unsayable that characterizes much of the fiction devoted to the new forms of terror' (Gray 2009: 132). For Gray, the crisis of imagination provoked by 9/11 is registered in the widespread recourse to the language of trauma in the first wave of post-9/11 literature, which draws on 'the sense of those events as a kind of historical and experiential abyss, a yawning and possibly unbridgeable gap between before and after' (2009: 130). This gap appears in 9/11 literature as a disjunction between the world-historical scale of the event and the domestic narratives that have arisen from it. Unable to articulate a new language in which to narrate 9/11, writers fell back into the familiar structures of domestic crisis and resolution, thereby 'reducing a turning point in national and international history to little more than a stage in a sentimental education' (2009: 134). True to Gray's criticism, Lianne appears to be retreating into an identity, and DeLillo into a novelistic framework, defined in familiar and

familial terms. The ‘enigmatic traces of others’ (Butler 2006: 46) which constitute Lianne’s identity as a social subject seem to exclude those whose otherness is more deeply marked, such as Elena, the neighbour whose Middle Eastern music provokes an aggressive reaction from Lianne. However, Gray’s assumption that the domestic is insignificant in comparison to the world-historical scale of 9/11 itself trivializes the domestic and the personal. The strength of DeLillo’s writing is to draw a connection between the two, showing how the collective trauma of 9/11 reshapes the relationship between private and public at the most intimate level and exploring the forms of self-recognition that shift makes possible. Where DeLillo’s best-known work delineated the conditions of modernity which made 9/11 possible, even inevitable, *Falling Man* explores the experience of survival, the time when ‘Everything [...] is marked by after’ (138).

Early in the novel DeLillo provides a visceral metaphor for the invasiveness of trauma. The doctor treating Keith for his injuries suffered in the towers tells him of a grisly after-effect of suicide bombings:

The bomber is blown to bits, literally bits and pieces, and fragments of flesh and bone come flying outward with such force and velocity that they get wedged, they get trapped in the body of anyone who’s in striking range [...] Then, months later, they find these little, like, pellets of flesh, human flesh that got driven into the skin.

They call this organic shrapnel. (16)

The gruesome phenomenon literalizes Cathy Caruth’s assertion that in trauma ‘the outside has gone inside without any mediation’ (Caruth 1996: 59). Trauma is here figured as the result of corporeal porosity, implying by extension that recovery involves exfiltration of the otherness that has invaded the subject: hence the emphasis on clearly demarcating self and other in the post-9/11 discourse of the Bush administration. Drawing on Bersani and Butler, I have suggested that *Falling Man* proposes another version of mourning, and a different conception of

subjectivity – one based on acknowledging our primary vulnerability and the presence of the other in the self. Furthermore, this mourning, contingent subject is mediated in the novel by the aesthetic and staged in Lianne’s response to the paintings of Morandi and the performance art of Falling Man. Terrorism presents the body’s fragility and permeability as a source of horror: in *Falling Man*, by contrast, the contingency of the subject is a source of connection, even wonder. This, ultimately, is the counter-narrative, refuting the fantasy that we are autonomous subjects capable of insulating ourselves from an external other imagined as threatening and invasive – a fantasy that underpinned the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. Instead, looking allows Lianne to conceive vulnerability not as a crisis of selfhood but as its fundamental condition. This is the basis of Butler’s claim for the ethical value of mourning. Trauma can serve as the point of departure for a re-conceptualization of political community:

To be injured means that one has the chance to reflect upon injury, to find out the mechanisms of its distribution, to find out who else suffers from permeable borders, unexpected violence, dispossession, and fear, and in what ways [...] the dislocation from First World privilege, however temporary, offers a chance to start to imagine a world in which that violence might be minimized, in which an inevitable interdependency becomes acknowledged as the basis for global political community. (Butler 2006: xii–xiii)

This is the fragile promise of the ‘counter-narrative’ DeLillo proposed in ‘Ruins of the Future’; in exploring a primary vulnerability to which we are all equally subject – even if, as Butler recognizes, that vulnerability is globally distributed in ‘radically inequitable ways’ (2006: 30) – the possibility of a recalibration of our relationship to the other is held open. Any understanding between the privileged Western writer and the young Muslim woman he watches praying must proceed from recognition of a shared humanity based upon their common exposure to

loss, however differently the risks are distributed. Art, whether visual or literary, offers a powerful medium for such recognition. In its complex, elusive meditation on the constitution of subjectivity, *Falling Man* offers one version of that counter-narrative and the promise it contains of an accommodation with otherness. ‘We are neither present in the world nor absent from it’, writes Bersani (2006: 161); presumably, then, the world is neither absent from nor fully present in us. Through art Lianne recognizes herself as always in touch with an outside, as thrust into a world of which she is a part and yet from which she is apart.

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² For a reading of how *Point Omega* works also as a form of ‘counter-narrative’, see Catherine Gander’s essay in this volume (xx).

³ Canal Street has functioned across DeLillo’s oeuvre as a symbol of urban multiculturalism; see Maria Lauret’s reading of ‘Take the A Train’ in this volume (xx).

⁴ Further references to *Falling Man* will consist of page numbers only. All references will be to this work unless indicated otherwise.

⁵ See Rebecca Harding’s essay on *The Body Artist* in this volume (xx), as well as Duvall (2011), Kauffman (2011) and Osteen (2008).

⁶ The controversy surrounding the photograph’s publication in the *New York Times* on 12 September 2001, and its subsequent censorship, is detailed in Junod (2002).